

# Using Reflective Questioning To Promote Collaborative Dialogue

Reflective questioning creates opportunities for individuals to reflect aloud, to be heard by one or more colleagues, and to be prompted to expand and extend thinking through follow-up questions.

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For some time now, reflective practice has occupied a position of importance in the professions (Schön, 1983). Its relevance for educators today is heightened by the current focus on the development of learning communities and learning organizations (Senge, 1990). Reflection is essential to educators' capacity to think not only about their practice but also about *how* they think, their implicit theories, and the sense they make of their experiences (Argyris & Schön, 1975). The experience of reflection

is enhanced when professionals are able to communicate with each other in ways that encourage and expand the process.

The use of reflection and reflective practices as strategies for developing more thoughtful and effective educators raises a number of important questions for staff developers. What kinds of activities and programs should be implemented to establish habits of reflection among prospective and practicing school personnel? How does a staff developer encourage and support reflection in professional development settings? How does a district or site administrator provide opportunities for reflection among colleagues?

One powerful form of reflection occurs when educators engage in professional dialogue with each other in small groups. The value of such professional exchanges is enhanced when participants use specific ques-

tioning skills to support the reflective process. *Reflective questioning* creates opportunities for individuals to reflect aloud to be heard by one or more colleagues, and to be prompted to expand and extend thinking through follow-up questions. Reflective questioning is a skill that can be developed and used by educators in all roles. Individuals can use it with peers, clients, supervisees, students (adult or youth), interns or mentees, and so forth.

This article is based on our experiences over the past decade teaching reflective questioning skills to educators and staff developers in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe. It includes background information about the origin of the strategy, describes various forms of reflective questioning and conditions that support its use, and provides guidelines for formulating and asking reflective questions. We provide two

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anecdotes to suggest the kinds of outcomes that can be reached through this strategy and conclude with recommendations to staff developers.

### Origin of Reflective Questioning

The source of the reflective questioning strategy is the qualitative research methodology used by staff of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (FWL) in its intensive study of school administrators (Dwyer et al., 1985). Participants reported that the process of being observed and interviewed about their work provided them with valuable opportunities for reflection and self-assessment (Dwyer et al., 1983). This, in turn, led FWL staff to create a program of professional development that encouraged school leaders to work with each other in a similar fashion.

In the Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL) program, school leaders work with peer colleagues to engage in inquiry, reflection, and analysis about their own work. Partners learn specific skills that they use to observe and interview each other on the job over time, collecting and analyzing information about their own and their partners' leadership activities. The process can be likened both to action research and peer coaching. (Complete descriptions of PAL appear in Barnett, 1989, and Lee, 1991.)

In PAL, the basic building blocks of the inquiry process are shadowing and reflective interviewing. Shadowing creates a record of an administrator's work activities through direct observation; the reflective interview is used to extend the learning after the observation. By asking questions about the observation, the interviewer provides an opportunity for his or her partner to reflect on what occurred. These reflections may include thoughts about how and why events unfolded, feeling associated with events, exploration of alternatives, plans for next steps, and so forth.

By thinking about the events, the observed person achieves a greater awareness of self and an increased understanding of how he or she enacts the role of school leader. This awareness and understanding encompasses areas such as personal and professional values and priorities, theoretical and applied knowledge, preferred modes of action, and the strengths and limitations one brings to the leadership task. As participants carry out multiple cycles of observation and interviewing, they are able to examine how policies,

practices, and resources are linked as a system in their school (Barnett, 1990).

Reflection is also used in professional development activities such as coaching and mentoring in which the goal is to provide participants with a process of peer dialogue about their educational practice. We use the term "reflective interview" to describe the process when reflection is coupled with a shadowing experience. But direct observation is not a prerequisite to a reflective interaction, in which case we use the term "reflective questioning" to describe the interaction process.

### Developing Reflective Questioning Skills

Reflective questioning is a technique in which one person prepares and asks questions that are designed to provide opportunities for the respondent to explore his or her knowledge, skills, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values. In a professional development setting, the typical goal is to broaden and deepen the respondent's understanding with respect to self, work roles, and/or performance.

Reflective questioning encourages the respondent to explore his or her own thinking; it is not intended to direct the respondent to a conclusion pre-determined by the questioner. For questioning to be truly reflective, the questioner must respect the respondent's statements, suspend judgment, and avoid attempts to manipulate his or her thinking.

### When is Reflective Questioning Appropriate?

To determine if the strategy might be beneficial, the questioner must consider the context in which it will be used, the purpose for its use, and the relationship between himself or herself and the person(s) being questioned.

**Context and purpose.** Any context that calls for thoughtful and personal consideration invites reflective questioning. Processes may include considering alternative courses of action, examining relations between desired and achieved outcomes, clarifying beliefs or values, exploring commonalities (such as shared experiences, challenges, beliefs) within a group, reviewing the significance of an experience, and so forth.

Reflective questioning is appropriate only if its purpose is to support the respondent(s) in a *personalized process of exploration*.

The questioner must be willing and able to work with whatever ideas, information, thoughts, and feelings arise. In contrast, the questioning process loses its reflective quality when the questioning is designed to lead the respondent to see what the questioner wants him or her to see, or to assess or evaluate the response.

**Relationship with the respondent.** The questioner's professional (and perhaps personal) relationship to the respondent influences the questioning process, as does the way the questioner treats the information received. For example, a supervisor may

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find that the best opportunities for reflective questioning are at times other than when he or she is engaged in evaluation of the other person's performance, since the evaluation process requires making judgments, which will hinder the reflective dialogue.

### What Type of Climate Supports Reflective Questioning?

Before one can change something it is necessary to know what is occurring now. The change process often begins with increased self awareness and a willingness to examine one's own current practice. Even when the purpose of a reflective activity is simply increasing awareness of self, the process involves some risk. Thus, a climate of trust is important for supporting the process.

Questioners can help achieve such a climate by establishing two important norms: confidentiality and a non-judgmental stance in the interaction. These norms apply not



**Figure 1**

**Guidelines for Preparing and Asking Reflective Questions**

**Preparing Questions**

1. Base questions on the respondent's own experiences
2. Word questions in neutral, non-judgmental ways.
3. Keep an overall purpose in mind.
4. Be prepared to follow up initial questions.

**Asking Questions**

1. Use a neutral tone of voice.
2. Incorporate active listening skills.
3. Refrain from giving advice.

only to the interaction between two individuals, but also among the members of larger groups that are engaged in reflective questioning. Group facilitators need to make these norms explicit and hold group members accountable for them. When participants find that revealing their thoughts and feelings can be done without fear of judgment or censure, they are able to process questions in greater depth.

**Preparing and Asking Reflective Questions**

Our experience has shown that most educators need assistance in learning to create reflective questions and in assessing how their verbal and non-verbal behaviors can promote reflective dialogue. We provide guidelines for preparing and asking questions and have educators practice these skills with each other. The guidelines are summarized in Figure 1 and described in the following sections.

The practice activities involve multiple opportunities to create and ask reflective questions in groups of two or three. These questions are typically based on role plays and participants' recollections of their own experiences. Written vignettes, case studies, and videotaped segments can also serve as the sources of situations for reflective questioning practice. Participants receive feedback on their practice activities from each other and from the workshop facilitators. As repeated practice cycles are carried out, participants are regularly asked to step back from the experience to reflect on what they are learning, which in turn supports them in refining and expanding their skills.

**Preparing questions.** The following four guidelines help questioners prepare questions.

1. *Base questions on the respondent's own experiences.* For questions to encourage a respondent to reflect, they must make sense to the person. When people reflect, they are exploring their own experiences. Individuals can reflect on others' experiences only in reference to themselves. For example, a person compares a colleague's experience to his or her own or reaches his or her own interpretation of its meaning. Questions need to be anchored in the experiences of the person being questioned if they are to be perceived as authentic.

2. *Word questions in neutral, non-judgmental ways.* Questions that use loaded language will be more likely to inhibit the

**Figure 2**

**Types of Questions and Statements That Can Encourage Reflection**

**EXAMPLE**

**CONSEQUENCE/REACTION**

**Clarifying Questions**

*Tell me about how your reading program is organized and delivered.*

Allows respondent to describe a situation in his/her own words

*What happened when you spoke with the parents?*

Encourages respondent to provide detailed information

**Purpose/Consequence Questions**

*What kinds of outcomes do you anticipate occurring if the teachers start the program?*

Recognizes the possible results associated with an event

*What reason guided your choosing these children to participate in the program?*

Allows respondent to indicate the rationale for his or her decision

**Linking Questions**

*You indicated that many students have low self-esteem. You also mentioned that a new program you've started is aimed at social responsibility. Is there a relationship between these two issues?*

Encourages respondent to tie together different pieces of information

*How has this experience validated or changed your thinking?*

Acknowledges how experiences influence respondent's attitudes and behaviors



reflective process than to support it. Questions should avoid implying that the questioner has the correct answer, expects an appropriate response, or is engaged in assessment or evaluation. For example, interviewers should avoid using phrases such as, "Why didn't you....?", "Don't you think that...?", or "Weren't you really trying to ...?"

3. *Keep an overall purpose in mind.* Again, for questions to make sense to individuals, there needs to be some reason for the questioner to be asking them, some purpose for the interaction. Reflective questions can assist during the early stages of forming a professional relationship and later as part of self-assessment and in planning future actions. There is no single "right purpose" for reflective questioning. To be useful to participants, however, the exchange should have some purpose about which the participants are in accord.

4. *Be prepared to follow up initial questions.* A reflective dialogue develops through interaction. The initial question may open the door to reflection, but the process will not be sustained unless the questioner is prepared to go the next step. This means having follow-up questions in mind and adjusting the succeeding questions in response to what the respondent is saying.

Reflective questioning can be compared to a dance in which the questioner both leads and follows. While he or she has a purpose in mind and a sense of where the dialogue may go, the questioner also follows the respondent's direction and takes cues about follow-up questions based on what is said.

*Asking questions.* Once questions are prepared, three additional guidelines will assist questioners in the reflective dialogue.

1. *Use a neutral tone of voice.* Intonation and body language need to be congruent with the non-judgmental words to deliver a supportive message. A phrase such as "Can you explain what you mean by that?" becomes highly charged if the emphasis is placed on the word "explain," "mean," or "that," or if one's posture becomes aggressive.

2. *Incorporate active listening skills.* The reflective process can be assisted by allowing the respondent ample time and opportunity to think aloud and to expand on initial thoughts. Active listening includes such skills as making eye contact, nodding, restating key words, and including sounds that signal the respondent to continue (for example, "uh-huh" or "mm-hm"). The ques-

tioner should not be so eager to go on to the next question that he or she cuts off the respondent's thinking.

3. *Refrain from giving advice.* Providing advice shifts the dialogue away from reflection to problem solving. The respondent may welcome (or even ask for) advice, but the questioner's opinions can influence the direction and content of reflection away from the respondent's own thinking. We recommend that problem solving and advice giving be kept separate from reflective dialogue.

### **What Types of Questions Promote Reflection?**

As we work with groups of educators to develop reflective questioning skills, we frequently encounter the belief that meaningful reflection will occur only if the "right" questions are asked. We have found this not to be the case. Rather, we find that some very basic and even obvious types of questions are helpful. Simply saying, "Tell me more about that situation" or "Can you give me an example?" will stimulate reflection.

Our experience has taught us that the attitudes and behavior of the questioner are at least as important as the questions he or she asks. Attitudes that facilitate reflection demonstrating genuine interest in what the other has to say, listening attentively to responses and building from them in the dialogue, and supporting the other person in speaking authentically and honestly. In addition, we have found that there are some general types of questions that facilitate the reflective process. Figure 2 provides examples of the three types of questions described below.

*Clarifying Questions.* These questions provide an opportunity for the respondent to clarify events, actions, feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. Questions that allow a person to describe a situation, for example, serve at least three functions: they anchor reflection in the concrete reality of experience; they provide an opportunity for the person to recapture the event for purposes of examination; and they serve as a springboard for deeper exploration of meanings, alternatives, and conclusions.

Thus, while it might seem that clarifying questions are "pre-reflective," they are often an essential part of the reflective process. Question stems for clarifying questions include: "How would you describe ..."; "Can you recall what occurred ..."; "What happened when you ...". The basic "who," "what," "when," and "where" questions

asked by newspaper reporters can serve as the start of clarifying questions.

*Purpose and consequence questions.* Questions that allow individuals to consider both the intended and unintended outcomes of situations assist them in seeing cause and effect relationships connected to their own actions. This is a stepping stone to considering if these are the individual's desired outcomes which, in turn, may lead to change. Question stems for this type of question might be: "What were you hoping to accomplish by ..."; "What kinds of outcomes did you anticipate ..."; "What reasons guided your choice of ...". This type of question is

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often inquiring about the "why" aspect of the respondent's behavior or thinking without directly saying, "Why did you do that?"

*Linking questions.* One of the most important uses of reflective questioning is to support educators in articulating the connections among various elements of their professional worlds. When educators can explore their own implicit theories of action, they are in a much stronger position to consider changes in their behavior (Argyris & Schön, 1975; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

Linking questions provide opportunities for respondents to consider relationships among variables such as the specific contexts in which they act, their own personal/professional histories, their beliefs and values, their goals and aspirations, the resources available to them, their interdependence with other professionals, their interpersonal relationships, and the knowledge and skills base



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that guide them. Questions that encourage linking will often take the form of mirroring back two or more ideas or pieces of information from the respondent's previous responses and asking if they might be related.

Linking questions need to be open enough for the respondent to reflect on the basis of his or her own experiences, as opposed to what the person may think should be the answer. A question to elicit a teacher's thinking about instructional strategies and student learning, for example, must communicate permission to consider how his or her actual experience may not match what was taught during preservice or inservice activities.

Another type of linking question is the

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"So what?" question. This type of question is often used at the conclusion of a workshop when a facilitator asks participants to consider the implications of the experience for them as they anticipate returning to the workplace. Similarly, when an administrator reviews with a staff member a particularly challenging situation and its eventual outcome, this kind of question can assist him or her in generalizing from the experience.

### **Outcomes Associated with Reflective Questioning**

Our experience suggests there are multiple benefits for educators who work closely with their peers in creating and asking reflective questions. Not only do they gain new insights and knowledge by reflecting on their own situations, but they also benefit by suspending judgment in attempting to better understand the context, rationale, and consequences of other professionals' situations (Barnett, 1990; Lee, 1991). Two anecdotes illustrate the types of effects we have observed.

A common outcome is that an individual's thinking and action are influenced during the reflective questioning process. A prime illustration of this occurred after a principal had observed a colleague conducting a teacher evaluation session. Before engaging the colleague in the reflective questioning process, he was quite skeptical about the way in which she had conducted the evaluation and questioned the appropriateness of her approach. Nevertheless, he assumed a neutral and non-judgmental position, setting aside his interpretation while he used reflective questions to explore the situation.

His colleague clarified the background of her school's teacher evaluation system, explained her reasons for using it, and described its effect on teachers. As a result, he found himself not only understanding her perspective but also shifting his own beliefs. He ultimately decided to incorporate some of his colleague's ideas into his own teacher evaluations.

Reflective questioning also has an effect on educators' collective actions (Mueller & Lee, 1989). A group of administrators participated in the year-long PAL process. As a result of the trust, mutual respect, and shared understanding that developed among participants, the group decided to continue meeting to discuss and resolve common problems they faced.

Initially, the group addressed curricular

and instructional challenges in their individual schools. Further reflection led them to a district wide problem. They were called away from their sites several times each September for district meetings, detracting from getting the school year underway efficiently. The group approached central office personnel who, upon realizing the dilemma they were creating, changed the district's calendar to avoid September meetings. Based on their initial success in working collaboratively with district officials, the group took on additional district wide improvement efforts, such as developing an alternative evaluation procedure for principals. The group became a significant part of the district's decision making process.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

For educators who are learning the strategy of reflective questioning, especially for those in positions of leadership and authority, one of the greatest challenges is the suspension of judgment. Staff developers who are accustomed to providing expert answers might also find it difficult to acquire and demonstrate the reflective questioning strategy. The following guidelines can help.

*1. Recognize and honor the importance of hearing and being heard.* We all know what it feels like when we are speaking to someone who presumes to know what we think before we say it, or doesn't really hear/understand what we mean, or passes judgment without knowing the whole story. It can be both frustrating and demeaning.

The same is true in the reflective questioning process. The questioner must acknowledge and remember that she or he really cannot know how another person sees things or why another person acted in a certain way without first hearing that person speak. All of us believe we have good reasons to think and act as we do. As reflective questioners, we must remember that our colleagues believe the same of themselves.

*2. Keep the process at the forefront.* The success of reflective questioning does not depend on asking "just the right question." It relies much more on creating opportunities for respondents to think aloud and construct meaning for themselves. The questioner needs to focus more on whether the process is providing such opportunities than whether particular questions are being asked.

When staff developers and other educa-



tional leaders can assist colleagues in learning ways of talking together that increase understanding of self and others, the stage is being set for collaborative dialogues about improving collective practice. Reflective questioning is a promising strategy in the creation of such learning communities within and across schools.

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